

The Exciting Church

For many of us the last few weeks have been exciting. The comings and goings in the political world are the very stuff of high drama. Last week many of us were glued to our screens as we witnessed the birth of a new political era, the first coalition government in 70 years, two young men effectively running our country. Those of us who are *West Wing* addicts saw something of that same atmosphere played out on our screens as the power brokers of our land discussed the future. Power and the ability to change things are simultaneously alluring and intoxicating. In *The West Wing*, Sam Seaborn quits his job in a prestigious law firm on the eve of his appointment as partner. CJ Cregg leaves a similar media position and simply asks the question of the new candidate, 'Is he a good man?' Power and the ability to change things are simultaneously alluring and intoxicating. In the world, people are prepared to give up everything to follow a great ideal. It would be appropriate at this stage to use the well-known exam form: 'compare and contrast'. As we gather this week in General Assembly, do we have that same sense of excitement as we take decisions which could lead us into a bright new dawn in terms of taking the gospel to Scotland? What about our experience last Sunday in church? Was it a time of high drama soul-thrilling excitement? Compare the dullness and despondency of our church life with the vibrancy of what some may call 'the real world'. As children of the living God surely we can expect something bigger than that. It used to be said in the 20th century that the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland was like a national parliament – but now in our post-devolution secularized world, it hardly rates a column in the national press. It goes without saying that the press and general public regard attending the Free Church Assembly as being on a par with a visit to the national convention of paint dryers!

In the last few years, how many books have been written about the church? I can think of *Total Church*, *Deep Church*, *Liquid Church*, *The Responsive Church*, *The Prevailing Church*, *Vintage Church*, and the list goes on. In each of these books there are exciting ideas. I hope that we have read several of them. There are many reasons for these books being written, some better than others.

May I suggest a title for this paper? *The Exciting Church*. For many of our people that is an immediate turn-off. The last thing that people want is an exciting church. Why? Because the concept of excitement is tied up with superficiality, entertainment and man-centredness. I suggest that the opposite is the case: if there is no sense of excitement as the church meets then there is a fundamental problem with that church. I love these words of Annie Dillard: '*On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does any-one have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect,*

does no one believe a word of it? It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

When people think of the Free Church of Scotland is this the picture they have in their minds? Hardly. The truth is that we are regarded as a quaint relic from a bygone age. When we are examined we are seen in terms of the church equivalent of the Galápagos Islands, where strange species survive and are subject to the gaze of social anthropologists. Even within evangelicalism we are admired to a degree by many but emulated by few. We need to be careful: there are real dangers in pandering to public perceptions. A church is not a construct which emerges after dialogue with a myriad of focus groups. It is the people of God called together whose default position is to be counter-cultural. If we are regarded as weird, then so be it: that goes with the territory. But let us be sure that it's for the right reasons.

When we and others think of the Free Church of Scotland, the last thing that is on our minds is excitement. It may also be that we are so used to mediocrity that we have given up on the idea of God visiting us again in power. I am reminded of the paramedic at the side of the road accident victim. You know how the victim feels: they have been injured and the life is flowing out of them. The feeling they have is not entirely unpleasant as they drift off to a deep sleep. They just want to follow the light. The paramedic comes, slaps them on the face and shouts in their ear, "What's your name? Stay with me." It may not be a bad thing for us to ask ourselves what our name is. I hope that we will not be tempted to slip into a coma from which we may never return.

The picture of us as dour and dull is by no means uniform. In an article in *The Scotsman* in July 2009, we read: *'The prison officer's astonishment tickled Bob Akroyd. The Saughton worker had just discovered that Bob, part-time prison chaplain, was a minister with the Free Church of Scotland. They're often referred to as the Wee Frees and assumed to be a dour lot. "That can't be," said the astounded officer. "You smile!" '.* The mystery worshipper in *The Ship of Fools* web site visited Bon Accord, Aberdeen and gave the following question and answer: 'Did the service make you glad to be a Christian?' Yes! They cheerfully exploded the myth of the dour Scots Presbyterian.' The fact that it is considered a surprising story that the, dour dull stereotype does not always exist, surely demonstrates the pervasiveness of that stereotypical image.

When I speak of excitement I mean that sense that God is present - the almost tangible sense that the power of another world is about to break through

Origins of excitement

New Testament Church AS we look at this concept of the exciting Church, where does it come from? The main source is the Bible. You really have to try very hard to escape the fact that our faith is exciting. The early church were known as men who caused trouble all over the world. They were people who turned the world upside down and who saw their movement grow from a few frightened people in an upper room to the largest faith group the world has ever known. At the centre of it all was Jesus of Nazareth. Forget the image of a fresh-faced hippy in a tie dyed kaftan who is nice but harmless. He had a price on his head before he was born and although he was the living embodiment of love, he was hated. In every meeting with the religious establishment of his day he left them confused and angry. He was not the man who came to start a new religion: he was the one sent from God to do away with religion. Just take a cursory walk through the gospels and sense the excitement. His power was such that fishermen left their nets. A taxman simply left his booth and followed them with a promptness and conviction that was striking. It is significant that in the case of Matthew, he called him from that place of questionable business. He did not wait for him to get tidied up morally: he called him from where he was. That's our Jesus: the one who came to touch the untouchable and to live among the drunks and prostitutes to such an extent that he got a reputation. He taught like no other teacher. He had authority and the common people heard him with gladness. He healed the sick unambiguously and took upon himself the very activity of God. This was not surprising because he was God! When he spoke about the Scriptures he explained their meaning like no-one else ever did or could do.

What about the early Church? It really is the story of thirty years that changed the world, the story of a spiritual volcanic eruption which changed the world. I think that Michael Green is correct when he looks at the Church today and says: *'The Christian faith has been around so long that it is easy to forget what it was like when it was new. It is like a great ocean liner with its hull encrusted with barnacles'*. What would it have been like to be a member of that early church, to listen to that sermon in Acts 2 and see the response? Not just the tongues of fire, the mighty wind and the languages, but also the people having all things in common and reporting that there were no needy among them. It's not just the large movements of the Spirit like Pentecost which makes us glad: it is the other little details. Do you notice in Acts 11 where the 'circumcision party' came down on Peter for eating with a Gentile? The Jerusalem men were not the easiest to deal with. Remember Barnabas who saw evidence of the grace of God and was glad, and he encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their heart. J.B. Phillips noted of the early Church: *'The church began in power, moved in power, and moved just as long as she had power. When she no longer had power she dug in for safety. But her*

blessings were like manna. When they tried to keep it overnight, it bred worms and stank. So we have monasticism, scholasticism, institutionalism – all indicative of one thing: absence of spiritual power. In church history every return to the New Testament has been marked by a new advance somewhere, a fresh proclamation of the gospel and an upsurge of missionary zeal.’ He went on to say: *‘It is the church that is willing to die to worldly standards that will know the power of Christ’s resurrection. It may be envied for its depth of loving relationships, or for its spontaneous joy. It may be hated for its revolutionary lifestyle, exposing the hollow values and destructive selfishness of the society it seeks to serve; but it certainly cannot be ignored.’* Think about your particular branch of the Church. Is it being ignored? Don’t make the excuse that a secular society has no place for truth. We are being ignored because our values and lifestyles are so unremarkable.

I have been thinking a lot recently about the difference between the church at Antioch and the Jerusalem church. The catalyst for this is in an older missionary book, *The Antioch Factor* by Ross Paterson. The thesis is that the Jerusalem church focused on its own area and on largely Jewish people. To a certain extent it was conservative and influenced by synagogue worship, whatever that looked like. The Antioch church was an exciting church: the people were so obsessed by Jesus that they were first given the nickname of ‘Christian’. The gospel message was not carried by big names or personalities but by ordinary people, people who had been persecuted for their faith and had lost everything because of their devotion to Jesus. The Antioch church had strong leadership in the shape of Paul and Barnabas who were noted for their encouragement and teaching abilities. The church looked beyond its own borders. The barrier breaking power of the gospel is seen in the way this Gentile church brought aid to a Jewish church 300 miles away during a time of famine. An exciting Church does things which are new and shocking to onlookers. It is significant that the Jerusalem church drops off the radar during the second half of Acts. There are many possible reasons for this but one possibility is that they became so ingrown that they ceased to make an impact on the wider culture and the world.

The Reformation Church. But where else do we look for our DNA? A significant foundation stone is the Reformation. This is of course the 450th anniversary of the Scottish Reformation. I think Harry Reid is correct when he writes: *‘1560 was indubitably the greatest year in Scotland’s history.’* The Reformation marked the death knell of Medieval Scotland and, as Tom Devine has recently helpfully argued, it was a highly significant factor in bringing about the Scottish Enlightenment. On 6 July 1560, the Treaty of Edinburgh was signed. The Reformation Parliament met in August 1560 and the three great documents of the Reformation Church were produced: *The Scots Confession* (which was drawn up in 4 days) *The First Book of Discipline* and *The Book of Common Order*.

We must use this 450th anniversary to try to rescue the reputation of the Reformation. It was one of the most exciting periods of the Church since the New Testament era. I think that we have a duty to pull the word 'reformed' away from the image of obscurantism. How was the Reformation exciting? It got the church back to work; the medieval church was simply not capable of relating to the needs and concerns of the modern world. The new Church engages and enthuses the laity and sees the potential of the cities. These were men and women who drank new wine and who witnessed the old wineskins bursting with glorious new life. The Reformation also produced an army of great thinkers quite simply because it revealed a great God

I wonder if we are sometimes in danger of behaving like practical medievalists. The medieval church was largely monastic in outlook if not totally in practice and the spirituality of the church had very little influence outside of the monastery. This has been argued successfully by Ernst Curtius. I love the image of Alistair McGrath who wrote: *'With the Reformation, the formative centers of spirituality gradually shifted from the monasteries to the market place, as the great cities of Europe became the cradle and crucible of new ways of Christian thinking and acting.'* The Reformation was not innovative in a superficial sense; it was a renewing of classic Christianity. It was classic and yet it was responsive. John Stott writes about the need for more 'R.C. churches', standing now for Radical Conservative churches, *"conservative in the sense that they conserve what Scripture plainly requires, but 'radical' in relation to that combination of tradition and convention which we call 'culture'. Scripture is unchangeable; culture is not.'* Again I agree with Alistair McGrath when he states that *'the Reformation is thus well placed to address the needs of our own day and age, where a consciousness of modernity is often tempered with an awareness of the need for stability and continuity with the past.'*

The inspiration for the exciting Church is not necessarily seen in the latest idea from the emergent or emerging stream. There is so much to inspire us from the past. The Reformation challenged the idea of the irreversibility of history: the truth is that what has been done can, and in many areas *should*, be undone. One of the tragedies of Protestantism is the lack of a long-term corporate memory; we live in an age where Lloyd Jones and John Stott are considered fathers. When you have a destination in mind it helps to know where you have come from. The risk of the Reformation was the belief that the core values of the Christian faith could and had to be applied to the strange world of the sixteenth century. They were bold enough to know that Renaissance was not the only show in town and that Reformation was even stronger. The Reformation was an embodiment of simplicity, creativity, freshness and vivacity.

After, and indeed during, the Reformation all was not entirely well. History reveals that after great movements there are always dips into complacency and even reversals. I am reminded of Dr Alexander Duff's analysis in his pamphlet of 1835 entitled, *'Missions the Chief End of the Christian Church'* when he challenged the church of his day to repent. He observed that after the Reformation, *'instead of going forward in a progress of outward extension, and onward aggression, with a view to consummate the great work which formed at once the eternal design of her head and the chief of her being: - the Church seemed mainly intent on turning the whole of her energies inward on herself. Her highest ambition and aim seemed to be, to have herself begirt as with a wall of fire that might devour her adversaries – to have her own privileges fenced in by laws and statutes of the realm.'*

This takes us neatly on to our more immediate forefathers.

The Disruption. We have the Free Church of the Disruption. The Disruption was many things. It was partially a political movement, in which the point was well made that the church has the sole right to decide matters of doctrine, worship and discipline. As such, it reflected the Reformation tradition of democracy and was allied to a movement for democratic reform that was moving through the UK. The old way of the benevolent Laird knowing what was best for the underclass was being eroded. The years of the Ten Years Conflict and perhaps the first twenty years of the new church were examples of what it means to be in an exciting church. There is a warning in all of this because there was most certainly a high degree of what we may call man-centred excitement. There is a certain flesh-pleasing buzz about public meetings with fiery demagogues rousing the multitudes, a red hot blogosphere and e mails being fired off a hundred a minute. In 1834 the Church of Scotland passed The Veto Act, which restricted the power of patronage by giving male heads of families the right to veto the patron's appointment. The next ten years were to see an excited church. The commissioners will be well aware of the scenes at Auchterarder where only three people signed the call to Robert Young who was the patron's choice, whereas 287 recorded their veto. We will all be aware of the events at Marnoch in the wonderfully named Presbytery of Strathbogie where the hapless John Edwards was imposed on the congregation having been voted for by one person, the local innkeeper, Peter Taylor. We see that in today's church controversy generates just as much excitement: the blogs light up, meetings are held, lawyers and locksmiths are put on standby. It is true that controversy is often necessary but the activity generated is often more like the energy of a demolition site than that of a building site. People love to watch a dog fight.

The Free Church however was not just born in controversy. It was also born in spiritual renewal. Dr Charles Brown once reminded the General Assembly that the Free Church *'had been nursed in the bosom of religious revival'*. In 1839, the year of the Auchterarder

controversy, William Burns had seen revival being born at Kilsyth and in 1846 at Johnshaven, a favored location for Free Church camps today, Andrew Bonar recalls *"I spent three hours speaking with anxious souls in private ... there are about thirty very deeply convicted of sin and many more under the Spirit's strivings. Dr Brewster's female teacher has been remarkably useful."*

In the present day Free Church it may be overstating the case to say that we have a crisis of identity. I'm not sure that we have sufficient momentum even to have a crisis. We do have to ask about the nature of our DNA. Are we the Free Church of 1843 or some sort of mutation? In genetics even the slightest mutation can lead to an organism which often has very little in common with the original. I think that the Disruption fathers give us a lesson in the exciting church. Consider the arch organizer, Thomas Chalmers, the first Moderator of the Free Church of Scotland. He led an impressive church planting project as a result of which, by 1848 over 700 churches and 500 manses were built as well as three theological colleges. Chalmers inspired students to work with him just a short distance from this very building in the West Port of Edinburgh in starting Sunday Schools, libraries and day schools. In many ways the West Port experiment was not 'an unqualified success' but at least he tried. The old maxim is surely true that it is better to have done a good thing badly than never to have tried at all. It would repay us to read again Brown's *Annals of the Disruption*. In some ways it reads like historical kailyard but it is also inspirational. What does an exciting church look like? In 1860 this General Assembly took a whole day to hear about conversions. The Moderator at the time, Dr Buchanan, wrote, *'Time absolutely failed for recounting the Lord's wonderful dealings in almost every part of the land. We had thought, many of us, that the whole extent of the present religious awakening was already generally known. But how striking and how delightful it was to find that the half had not yet been told.'*

I suggest that the spirit of 1843 is the spirit we ought to recover. There are lessons to be learned from the 1843 church. It mistook organizational growth for spiritual vitality and pride quickly took root in her midst. It too often abandoned confessional orthodoxy for an insubstantial and rootless pietism and failed to see *The Westminster Confession of Faith* for what it is: not just an historical document but also a bedrock for building an eternal kingdom. I am not sure if a Moderator's address has ever contained a book review but I would recommend all commissioners get Sandy Finlayson's *Unity and Diversity* which gives us a bite-sized portrait of ten founding fathers of the Free Church. We need to recover confessional diversity; an exciting church has a certain mix. In the book we see how the organisational skills of Chalmers allied to the scholarship of Cunningham, the evangelistic passion of Bonar and the international perspective of Duncan and Duff helped to make the immediate post-Disruption Free Church an exciting evangelistic, church planting, missionary-obsessed machine which at the same time

was rooted in social justice. We have become the church of Dr Kennedy who was a giant in his own time and in his own area. We owe Kennedy so much, especially in his defence of confessional orthodoxy and in warning us of the siren sounds of union with the United Presbyterians but Kennedy was just part of a portfolio of gifts that God had given us. Unity and diversity is not only possible but essential. We do not want to be like Russian dolls, all the same.

The danger in all this history is that whilst we can admire the past, we fail to emulate it. The question for us is, how do we create an exciting church in 2010? At the outset we say loud and clear: we do not create it but God creates us. We long for an exciting church. What are the primary elements of that?

May I suggest four.

Excitement in the character of God

We begin by realising that God is exciting. When using a word like 'exciting' about the character of God we are in danger of being flippant. There is however a spontaneous 'wow factor' when our churches become galleries which enable us to see the character of God. Perhaps the analogy of a gallery is inadequate because it places God as an abstraction, on a wall, in a safe place. David Wells gives us a helpful phrase in 'the caging of God'. He notes that we have placed God in the market place and we have transformed *'the God of mercy to the god who is at our mercy. We imagine that he is benign, that he will acquiesce as we toy with his reality and co-opt him in the promotion of our ventures and ideas'*. An exciting church is one where we are brought face to face with God himself. Moses and Paul were blinded by His presence: Isaiah felt undone. We are thankful to Rudolf Otto who gave us the concept of the numinous. He pointed out that the otherness of God was both terrifying and fascinating at the same time. There is the angularity of God which we neglect as we try to shave off the sharp edges which truth so often has. This is what Moses experienced at the burning bush. He was attracted to it, he wanted to go over and see this strange sight but he also hid his face because he wanted to see God. There is a weightiness in God and when we are in His presence we know it.

Think of who God is. There is no doubt that Moses was excited at the burning bush. Why? At the bush God disclosed Himself: my name is 'I am who I am'. Think about it; God's never beginning, never ending, never becoming, never improving, simply and absolutely there, to be dealt with on his terms or not at all. He did not have a beginning. God is not just a part of our world view; the universe has all to do with God.

The default position of the church has slidden into man-centredness. The books that people read and the sermons which draw people are so often therapeutic in nature. I think of Leslie Newbiggin who wrote: *"I suddenly saw that someone could use all the language of evangelical Christianity, and yet the center was fundamentally the self, my need of salvation. And God is auxiliary to that. . . . I also saw that quite a lot of evangelical Christianity can easily slip, can become centered in me and my need of salvation, and not in the glory of God."* Think of the excitement when we raise the focus of our churches to something bigger, the God of the universe. Do you recall John Piper's illustration of a man taking a trowel to the Grand Canyon, digging his little hole and asking people to spot the difference?

What do we want in our culture today? I think that the longings of our society are summarised in the recent film *Avatar*, the most 'spiritual' picture to come out of Hollywood for years but reflecting a wider trend, man's longing for the spiritual. In James Cameron's *Avatar* a man travels to the planet Pandora in the search for unobtainium. In that far-off planet he finds a spiritual race, people who worship nature. That is the competition of today. How do we meet it? We don't meet it by trying to match it. The situation we want to see replicated throughout Scotland is that of the man who entered the church at Corinth and said, 'Surely God is in this place'.

The holiness and the weight of God will surely make the church an exciting place to be. At this point we must point out the danger of achieving this by gimmickry and creating God in our own image. It is at this point that you can see the trajectory of traditional arguments. It is true that excitement is often feigned and there are attempts to manipulate by all sorts of means. There is however, if you like, the gimmickry of the right as well as the left. The idea that by using a false religious voice, imposing dress codes, retaining certain elements of church furniture, slowing down singing that we are somehow creating solemnity is so false and artificial. It is just as ridiculous as believing that the penchant for pew burning is the recipe for instant revival.

Excitement of proclaiming the gospel

A man once said that you have to try very hard to make the gospel boring. Consider the word itself. It is good news. Where do we start? Consider what happens when a person becomes a Christian. Think of the great concept of the new birth taught by Jesus. It is nothing less than a supernatural act of re-creation which is more wonderful than the creation of the universe itself. Could it be that the idea of conversion is being airbrushed out of our vocabulary in case it offends the sensibilities of the chattering classes who may make up our audience? There are so many elements of the gospel which make it exciting.

We have already alluded to the fact that the gospel is a powerful change agent. In our communities we know of people whose lives have been transformed by the Christian faith. Think of the many *Road to Recovery* groups which are held in our churches throughout the land. These are places of miracles where men and women have gained life.

That means that when we are communicating that gospel, awesome creative energy is in the room. The good news is that there is no-one who is too bad, no-one with a history so shocking that they are excluded. In the gospel the son of man hung on a cross, the wholly clean was defiled, humiliated and degraded that we may know a life free of guilt, condemnation, curse and ultimately free of sin itself. The mystery of the gospel is this, that it's not good people who get to heaven but bad. Jesus was the man who came in the name of love.

So what does an exciting church look like and how can we get there?

Preaching

We have to admit that, when the term 'preaching' is used, the adjective 'exciting' is not normally the one that most people would add! And yet the means of communication matches the excitement of the message. Preaching is, or should be, exciting.

One of our values is the primacy of preaching. Good preaching has been well described as 'logic on fire', so what are the elements of such 'exciting' preaching today?

There is a sense of unction. Again we are brought to the realm of the supernatural. We must be clear and explicit in our definition of 'unction'. It's not the same as volume. Loud preaching often induces headaches. It's not theatrical. Post-modern people just find that funny, false and totally off-putting. It may go down well on the conference circuit but it just does not cut the mustard in the communities to which we minister. Unction is surely when the Holy Spirit takes the message and applies it to the hearts of people in a way which is beyond the ordinary. If we don't have the help of the Holy Spirit we end up with a lecture. In today's culture a sermon is almost a synonym for a boredom-inducing talk. The interesting thing is that there is one mark of all Scottish vibrant and growing churches, and that is that they have a strong preaching ministry. It is also a fact that every Christian revival has been accompanied by a recovery of strong preaching. The mark of a powerful sermon is that even the most reluctant listener is pulled into its influence. The listener finds that they have been introduced to another dimension. There is a dynamic element which produces this sense of unction. It was Charles Bridges who wrote, *'of how little avail are the most splendid talents, the most mighty*

eloquence, and the most devoted diligence, except the unction be brought down from heaven by frequent and fervent supplications! Prayer is one half of our ministry, and it gives to the other half all its power and success.' So you can see the dynamic: people are praying before and during the service, and the meeting has been saturated by the whole congregation at the prayer meeting. As we enter our buildings, there is that sense that something is going to happen this morning and it's not at all in our control.

Listening to an exciting sermon is not always a pleasant experience. It may be that our pomposities are punctured and our self-righteousness is exposed. Our hearts are idol factories. It is never a pleasant thing for us to have our darling sins and crutches removed, even if they are being replaced by Christ himself. We come again to the Corinthian 'outsider' who when he came into the church he was convinced that he was a sinner and he felt that the 'secrets of his heart were being laid bare'. It is exciting when you feel that your story is being told by the preacher. Excitement is not the same thing as a feel-good factor. CS Lewis said that God's work in us is like house renovation; the problem is that God is the architect and our idea of a little redecoration or at most a little extension is turned by him into a radical remodeling. Over one hundred years ago a common question which was asked after a sermon was, how the listener 'got on' under the influence of the word of God as it was being preached; nowadays the more common question is, how the preacher 'got on'. It is a significant change. We look for little to happen to us during preaching.

Closely allied to unction is passion. They are not the same thing but there is a connection. There are so many elements to passion but let's just say that a dry sermon is an affront to God. When I say dry I mean, lacking in conviction and energy. JI Packer notes: *'In the modern West, cool, dead pan statements of fact are as much as is acceptable; any form of oratory, rhetoric, or dramatic emphasis to show the weight or significance of stated facts tends to alienate rather than convince.'* I am with Packer who urges preachers to *'swim against the stream of suspicion'* and to employ and use words and emphasis which are in keeping with the greatness and weight of spiritual issues. It used to be said that a new generation of preachers preached with all the fervour of weather forecasters but now the weather forecaster has left us far behind in terms of passion and delivery.

Just a brief word about relevance. Again, this is one of these concepts which has often been misused. Let me define my terms. When we aim for relevance in preaching we are looking for preaching which relates to our world and our circumstances. In this respect we think of the men of Issachar who understood the times. We also think of Jesus who was the master of relevance. Jesus preached on divorce, sexuality, materialism, social justice. Jesus used common language and everyday illustrations to such an extent that the common people heard

him gladly. If you turn to Paul, his letters deal with exactly the same issues. You really cannot beat the practical application of the epistles for engaging with real-life issues. We see politics, sexual orientation, debt, the question of taking brothers to law - there really is no end to the issues raised. In the exciting church people have a sense that the teaching speaks to them.

It has been said that our colleges and seminaries don't teach men to preach. In their defence it can be said that good preaching is not just taught: it is caught. Those of us who preach must be committed to lifelong learning as we hone our craft. We must take on board criticism and strive for excellence. A system of mentoring in preaching would be a good thing.

Remarkable Demography

Demography is that fascinating element of the social sciences which looks at things like age profiles, education and ethnicity as well as the economic, social and cultural processes which affect a given population. The New Testament Church was exciting because of its mix. We live in an age which talks a great deal about diversity and multi-culture and yet increasingly finds it difficult to practise what it preaches. The Church is, or should be, the ultimate barrier breaker and multi-cultural group. We are so different. It is a miracle that we can stay together – a miracle that only comes because the one thing we have in common is Christ. The mix leads to challenges such as the tension between people with Jewish and Gentile backgrounds and the rich and the poor. The revolutionary cry was 'we are all one in Christ Jesus'. It is significant that the first converts in Europe were a woman, a Gentile and a slave, the three most despised categories in the New Testament world. That first church at Philippi was recklessly culturally diverse. The thrill of the Ephesian church was the fact that the Ephesian Christians were no longer 'foreigners and aliens' but fellow citizens of another kingdom, the kingdom with its origins and destiny in heaven. The exciting church is one which revels in being a cultural soup. Homogeneity must be regarded as the enemy.

The present-day Free Church, for clear historical reasons is largely ethnically Highland and Island. The current list of ministers reveals that 43% were either born in Lewis and Harris or can claim Lewis or Harris parentage. Skye does less well, claiming only 7% whereas 0.7% are American born. This is not to be a badge of pride but rather a challenge. The aim ought to be that the demographic of the church reflects that of the communities in which we serve. The trouble is that some of us have already admitted defeat in this respect. We seem to have accepted that the Free Church should be confined to an ethnic group – in theory no, in practice yes. Scotland is a multi-cultural society which we ought to embrace with open arms. I am reminded of the terms of the Declaration of Arbroath, which imitating Galatians 3:28, asserts in the 'community of the realm': *'There is neither weighting nor distinction of Jew and Greek'*,

Scotsman or Englishman.' A more contemporary take on the same theme is given by our First Minister who has said: *'there are many shades and strands in the Scottish tartan'*. The fact is that it is rare for those who are outwith our present demographic to join us. In many of our congregations it is the unspoken expectation that 'incomers' will not come to us; they will quite simply pass us by as the ethnic church, not for them. The situation is just as serious in our cities where many of our congregations are quite simply ghettos. This is not acceptable. It is simply not right.

Our churches will change as different types of people begin to attend and make their spiritual home among us. We do not ask that people repudiate their ethnic and cultural identities but that they bring them with them. It would be great to hear as much Polish and Mandarin spoken in the foyers of our churches as Gaelic. This will begin to happen when we first ask the questions. I don't think our leadership asks enough hard questions of itself. We must stop the blame game and consider why the newcomers to our community flock to the bible-based evangelical church next door but never to us. The achievement of this inclusive ethos is tied up with our preaching: the principle is that we get into our churches the very types of people that our preaching is aimed at. In Scotland in 2010 this means that we aim our teaching at everyone. In heaven the lion and the lamb will lie down beside each other. A good start would be the Goth and the granny.

These are just four broad ideas of where excitement can come from. I know that many of you will be crying from your seats 'There is a very obvious fifth: prayer'. May I take it that we acknowledge that as so fundamental and significant that we don't need to specifically mention it! The crowning point of our church week is when we meet for prayer in whatever form. I love the picture that John Piper gives of church being placed on a war footing. In the New Testament the prayer meetings were places where excitement was felt. When men and women prayed, the earth shook, prison doors flew open and people dared to die with radiance.

Conclusion

There is a famous Chinese curse, 'may you live in interesting times'. Many of us don't really like interesting times. We would rather things stayed as they are. Whether we like it or not we live in interesting and exciting times. It is unwise to respond to the times by trying to maintain the status quo. If the status quo is defined as leaving things as they are, then it simply does not work. GK Chesterton in his book *Orthodoxy* has a chapter entitled, 'The eternal revolution' in which he writes, *"But all conservation is based upon the idea that if you leave things alone you leave them as they are. But you do not. If you leave a thing alone you leave it to a torrent of*

change. If you leave a white post alone it will soon be a black post. If you particularly want it to be white you must be always painting it again; that is, you must be always having a revolution."

In 2010, the Free Church of Scotland finds itself living under that Chinese curse. These are interesting times. Things are not as they were, the whole cultural philosophy has moved from a tacit approval of Christianity to a toleration of it and increasingly towards a violent antipathy. We live in a land where a golden eagle has rights of life denied to an unborn child. The new fundamentalists don't wear homburgs and burn fiddles. They sit in parliaments and preside over a culture of death and grayness. The new secular ayatollahs will lobby against prayer to Jesus in schools and curb our religious and civil freedoms.

These exciting times are not to be seen as threats but opportunities. Our churches are not Eeyore's Gloomy Place: Rather Boggy and Sad, but radiators of the light of the world, a light which has come to dispel the darkness. The culture gets excited by dancing dogs in shows which are ironically called 'talent shows'. The Church offers a great deal more than a show. We have substance and style, which speaks to the deepest needs of humanity.

We may not want to live in exciting times, but we do. Maybe we should grasp the opportunity. We cannot afford to be boring. We don't want to create an artificial excitement: we are not about creating the safe and secure excitement of the fairground ride through 'river rapids' - which in reality is controlled, stage-managed and only designed for cheap thrills. But we do want to be out on the open river, riding the waves and trusting in the one who alone has the power to calm, change and use them for his glory. The Free Church is at a critical juncture in our history - at just precisely the same time that the whole church in Scotland is facing the greatest change since the Reformation and Disruption. The choice is ours. Do we want the banality and boredom of managed decline? Or the pseudo-excitement of the ecclesiastical playground squabble? Or are we really prepared to risk all for the Gospel, launch out into the deep, and know that, even though we may go over the edge of the waterfall, the risk of not attempting the voyage is greater than the dangers thrown up by the adventure. The fantastic thing is that we are able to launch out into the deep, not because we have confidence in our own boat, or our abilities, or the future, but we have confidence in the one whose deep it is. Why should anyone be afraid of the waves if they trust the one who has power over them? Calvinists believe in God's sovereign ordering of all things - including our times. Are we not of all people to be the ones who are least fearful and most exciting?

So, what's it going to be Fathers and Brethren? Is it the end of the road for the Free Church? Will we now disappear into the archives of history? Are we to be preserved as a quaint reminder of times gone by, or is the adventure about to begin?